

Life in 'No-internet Cameroon'

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29 Mar 2017

The English-speaking regions of Cameroon have been facing a government-ordered internet shutdown since 17 January. This shutdown was imposed in the wake of ongoing strikes, violence and protests against the continued marginalisation of English-speakers.



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It used to be difficult to explain that there were two Cameroons. At conferences, international round tables where Africans and Afro-inquisitive Westerners would swap stories, as well as questions and assumptions about each other's countries, you would often have to debunk the myth that you were fluent in French by virtue of being Cameroonian and being called Monique. It would take too long to explain the invisible divide of that Picot Line. This problem, which has since either been ignored or normalised, would be too broad to broach. So you limit your comments on your country to corruption, the president's everlasting reign, conveniently patriarchal cultural 'values' - issues all Africans understand and face, unfortunately, irrespective of their country of origin.

But recently your government has made it easier to explain that there are two Cameroons. They somehow found that dividing line that no one would acknowledge existed and now it is clear: There is 'Internet Cameroon' and 'No-Internet Cameroon', that is, La Republic du Cameroun, which gained independence from French rule on 1 January 1960, and former British Southern Cameroons, which gained independence by merging with 'long lost brothers' on 1 October 1961.

Now when your colleagues from other countries ask you about Cameroon, it is easier to explain the problem that has long been ignored and subdued. Easier, not easy. The issues of who and what you identify as remains as complex as ever. Now your colleagues ask you, how are you coping? What is it like living under an internet ban? You attempt to help them envisage it. Imagine this, you say...

So, what is it like?

It is 7pm. Just two hours earlier news had broken of the government banning the associations at the forefront of the longest and largest strikes in recent national history. Now you are reading reports online, stating that some of the leaders of the strike (and one of the now banned associations) have been arrested. Upon reading this you feel alarmed. You attempt calling those you know to check on their well-being. Your call doesn't go through.

You try reaching out to mutual friends and family online to discuss your fears and ascertain their safety, but your messages keep loading. You can't see the tick next to your WhatsApp messages, the one that would confirm that they had been delivered. You assume it is the network; that the lines are probably crammed as the news of arrests sends everyone scurrying to call their loved ones. Things will surely escalate. And they do. You see cars held up on the road just outside your window - bikers have taken to blocking the roads with burning tires and abandoned cars to show their displeasure. You hear shots being fired into the air, the police descending with teargas.

People try to park their cars on the pavements to hide in the safety of neighbouring buildings like the one you live in. Others use the opportunity to loot and steal - you see them running with gas bottles stolen from the local gas station. You have dismantled your phone and reassembled it twice, removing and replacing your SIM card, restarting it, feeling confident that the network will return so you can check in with your loved ones or follow updates on the situation.

An hour later you receive a call from a friend who is stuck a mile from your place due to the road blocks. Could he come spend the night? he asks. The roads are blocked and the police are arresting whoever they can. When he arrives at your place, he tells you of the fear on fellow passengers' faces when they saw tires burning on the road and bikers with bottles - 'kerosene bombs' - only for the gendarmes to follow with batons and teargas.

He tells of running for his life and feeling ashamed for not stopping to help a female passenger who fell into the gutter as they both tried to escape. He says all this while reassembling his phone. You both still think it is a network problem.

Hours later, you can't sleep. You receive an SMS from a friend in Douala: has your Internet been cut off too? she asks. It dawns on you that this may actually be it; the government may actually have cut off internet access. You two laugh. Crazy people, you remark. How long can this last?

Douala, the economic capital, needs internet access or else businesses will crash. Heck, everyone needs internet access.

You two discuss the government's lack of foresight until you fall asleep. The next morning you learn that the other regions had their internet restored overnight. Just the two Anglophone regions where protests had occurred, just the people who had complained about marginalisation, had been cut off. As if to further confirm their claims.

That first day you are livid. You feel like you have been assaulted and no one is doing anything, or saying anything about it. People are still numb from the events of the day before. Government officials are busy attempting to reclaim control, assuming that the strike will die after the arrests and ban of associations. You know better. You are now both afraid and spitting mad. That first day is a Wednesday and, because of work, you persevere until the weekend, when you cross the regional border to Douala to access the internet.

Picot Line

As you cross the imaginary line (Picot Provisional Partition Line), your phone vibrates with the force of over a thousand pending messages. Picture an S5 having an epilepsy attack. You are in a cramped Danfo bus and you don't know which of

the messages to reply to first. Should you reply to any of the personal messages? Obviously people aren't that close to you if they can't reach you without internet-cheapened means of communication. Where do you begin with the professional emails? You have over 70 emails from the online youth development course you were taking. You have to submit entries for possible publication and writing residencies before deadlines, you have to send in a report on your mentoring of one of the YALI West Africa fellows. You have to do all this and more before returning home tomorrow evening. But since you're still in the bus and can't crack open your laptop, you head to Facebook.

You have over 200 notifications. Everyone who is anyone has an opinion on what is happening in the country. The strike has new leaders who are completely detached from the reality on the ground, your timeline is filled with hate speech, depressing reports of more arrests, violence in other regions, which you had not known of, and fake news of things that people claim happened in your area.

Your timeline drains and further angers you. Yet nothing angers you as much as the silence of the majority of Cameroonians in other regions. Nothing angers you as much as those who try to justify the Internet ban and those who use the internet ban to further their own motives. You post a few rants and get to work as soon as you arrive at your friend's place. You try to do a bit of work, but your spirit is broken. You lack zeal.

No-internet Cameroon

By the time you head back to No-internet Cameroon on Sunday evening, you have finished more than 3.5GB of data, you have ranted as much as you could, you have criticised government and rebel leaders alike, you have put up a blog warning the 'Silent Majority' and you have downloaded as many PDFs as possible, knowing you will no longer have access to Google when you cross the imaginary line. That is the first week.

For weeks to come you will make Douala a regular weekend spot. You have always detested the hot, congested city, but you now have no choice but to visit it. Your government has made you a regular commuter, an economic refugee in your own country.

After the second weekend in Internet Cameroon, you return to No-internet Cameroon with your laptop on 'hibernate' just so you can preserve the three Google Chrome windows and countless tabs you opened to use for work when back in the comfort of your own space. Unfortunately, the bumpy bus ride jarred your laptop battery and it had to be rebooted when you arrived. That is how you lost the information held in the countless tabs you had opened while in Internet Cameroon. That is when you began to consider leaving your country, the home you've worked so hard for. What sort of unrequited love relationship is this, you wonder?

Back in No-internet Cameroon, banks that have been closed for lack of internet have somehow been given limited access so as to distribute salaries. Smaller money transfer agencies still without access call branches in Internet Cameroon to verify the money transfer details you fill out on your form before handing you the money.

Young entrepreneurs with tech start-ups in Buea, also known as Silicon Mountain, commute daily, an added expenditure for budding companies. Other fixed businesses and institutions are frozen in place: NGOs that depend on regular communication with sponsors, associations (like yours) that do a lot of advertising of opportunities online, and the plethora of cyber cafes.

Somehow higher education, with all the research it entails, is expected to function with normalcy despite no internet access. How would lecturers work on lesson plans? How would students do assignments? SMS is the new WhatsApp, so the fake news and messages by new strike 'leaders' are still being spread.

Between the internet ban and at least two 'ghost town' days a week, the people of these two regions have adapted to a state of repression. It is now obvious that the ability of Cameroonians to adapt to situations with resilience is both a blessing and a curse.

#BringBackOurInternet

By the third weekend visit to Internet Cameroon, there is more advocacy for the restoration of internet access under the #BringBackOurInternet hashtag. It occurs to you that like Nigeria's #BringBackOurGirls, the likelihood of anything being brought back is slim. In Africa, with leaders like ours, we must find ways to take back what we value. They don't just 'bring'.

Nonetheless, the fact that more people are now aware of the injustice, that the global community is now speaking up as a result of people like Kathleen Ndongmo, Rebecca Enonchong, Kah Walla and others, raising awareness online, is considerably consoling.

A month later, trips to internet Cameroon tire you out; they are draining. Every time you cross the border and log in, you hear of another arbitrary arrest. You hear more fake news, either from the government news stations or from the rebel leaders. You are aware that you are fortunate to be able to travel to work weekly. There are others who cannot afford it.

However, having to leave your home and cross regional boundaries just to check your itinerary or reply to conference organisers is frustrating. Sometimes the thought of facing Douala traffic makes you drop off at the border of the city, and you perch in a little palm-wine shack, weary of your surroundings and able to respond only to urgent emails. One cannot do any real work under such conditions.

This is how it feels to be an 'internet refugee'. You are tired, you feel like you are under house arrest, coming from a region convulsed with the internet ban and frequent 'ghost town' days only to see posts from people in the comfort of other regions, selfishly egging on violent protests, all the while going to work, going to school, using the internet... things people of No-internet Cameroon no longer enjoy with regularity nor peace.

Imagine that.

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